

## The military option in the Iranian nuclear crisis

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René Rieger

## The Military Option in the Iranian Nuclear Crisis

*The Iranian nuclear crisis has reached a new peak. An Israeli air strike on Iran's nuclear facilities is more likely than ever. However, such a pre-emptive attack would not only be in breach of international law it would also fail to serve Israel's interests. On the contrary, a military attack would put Israel's security in jeopardy both in the short and long run and could provoke a regional war as well as an oil crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Therefore, the EU and its member states should persuade Israel to refrain from a pre-emptive strike against Iran. In contrast, Europe should advocate firmly a peaceful conflict resolution grounded on incentive-based negotiations with Tehran.*

The past months have seen a steady escalation of the Iranian nuclear crisis. As Iran makes progress in developing nuclear technology, which they constantly claim will be used solely for civil purposes, Israel's diplomatic saber-rattling gets increasingly louder. In the Western world, open discussion regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a pre-emptive strike on the Iranian nuclear facilities has reached an unprecedented level of intensity. Differences of opinion and disagreement in expert assessments within Israel, the United States, and Europe are climbing to pre-Iraq War levels. Depending on the contributor to the heated discussion, the result of an Israeli, US, or combined US-Israeli bombardment of Iran's nuclear program would be somewhere between increased regional security and a whole-scale regional war.

### Best Case Scenario for an Israeli Military Strike

Before the inauguration of a potential Republican administration in January 2013, a US participation in a pre-emptive attack against Iran is unlikely. Hence, the state to conduct air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities in the upcoming months would likely be Israel.

To begin with, such a pre-emptive attack would constitute a breach of international law. Art 51 UN Charta guarantees every sovereign state the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defense" irrespective of an authorization of the use of force by the UN Security Council. According to general legal conviction, self-defense does not necessarily have to be reactive in nature, it can also be preventive. This, however, requires the existence of a specific, objec-

tively imminent attack. The existence of an abstract threat is clearly insufficient. Over the past years, Iran has repeatedly uttered abstract threats against Israel's security. However, even an imminent Iranian crossing of the nuclear weapon threshold would not automatically modify the abstract threat into a specific one. Hence, without a substantive alteration of these conditions, there would be no situation of self-defense; an Israeli air strike would be pre-emptive in nature and constitute a breach of international law.

In a strategic best case scenario, Israel would succeed in destroying all relevant Iranian nuclear facilities without casualties in their own ranks. The Iranian nuclear program would be thrown back several years. However, the know-how would survive and build the foundation for a renewed nuclear program. This program would likely be implemented with even more ambition and popular support than the current one. Iran would then almost certainly strive for a nuclear weapon capability – currently constituting only a likely but not the definitive goal of the

regime. Hence, in several years – experts predict a setback of five years or less – Iran would regain its current level of nuclear development. Therefore, an

air strike would merely postpone a problem rather than solve it. Moreover, an Israeli attack on Iran would very likely radicalize Iranian foreign policy and make a renewed Iranian nuclear program even more dangerous.

An attack on Iran would increase the current Iranian regime's stability while suffocating any opposition tendencies. Historical evidence shows that in almost all cases foreign military aggression provokes a so called "rally-around-the-flag" effect, benefitting even

regimes with disputed popular legitimacy. Thus, the Iranian regime would be able to instrumentalize the attack to stabilize its rule.

Lastly, Iran would retaliate in one way or another. At the very least the Iranian regime would increase its support for anti-Israeli actors such as Hezbollah and encourage them to attack Israel.

In this scenario the Iranian regime would benefit from an Israeli attack while Israel would be subject to intensified attacks by non-state actors and see its security jeopardized by a renewed Iranian nuclear program a few years down the road. This in turn might make necessary what has already been suggested in Israeli academic circles, namely an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities every few years.

### Further Potential Repercussions

The described scenario is not only politically and strategically undesirable – particularly from an Israeli perspective – it is also highly unlikely. In the following, I will introduce additional expectable consequences of an Israeli air strike against Iran.

First, Israel's air strike could fail to destroy the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. Unlike the Iraqi Osirak reactor and the Syrian nuclear facility Israel destroyed in 1981 and 2007 respectively, the Iranian targets are heavily fortified and spread over a geographically large area. According to military experts, the simultaneous destruction of all targets would require more than 100 fighter jets and several tanker planes to refuel the jets on their return trip. It is doubtful that Israel has sufficient air refueling capacity for such a military operation. Moreover, it is uncertain whether Israel's GBU-28 *bunker buster* bombs will completely destroy the facilities at Natanz and Fordo, two of four targets Israel would likely attack. In the case of a failed air strike, the Israeli military's myth of superiority and invincibility would suffer yet another painful blow after its failure to defeat Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War. The Iranian regime would certainly exploit Israel's failure for propaganda purposes and present itself as victorious against the Israeli armed forces.

Second, an Israeli air strike against Iran would constitute an attack on a Muslim country and evoke sym-

pathy for the Iranian regime among non-Iranian Muslims, predominantly members of the Shia denomination. For years Iran has resorted to blatant anti-Israeli rhetoric and instrumentalized the plight of the Palestinians in an attempt to bolster its reputation and influence among the populations of Arab states. In the case of an Israeli attack, parts of the Arab Street would sympathize with Iran and expect their respective governments to retaliate at least diplomatically against Israel and its benevolent supporter, the United States. Among those sympathizing with Iran would be Shia citizens in the Arab Gulf monarchies. The latter's silent endorsement of the Israeli strike would add additional fuel to the ongoing conflict be-

tween discriminated Shia segments of the population and Sunni regimes particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The fact that Saudi Arabia's Shia minority lives predominantly in the oil rich Eastern province where it makes up roughly 50% of the population adds a significant economic aspect to the equation. Any escalating conflict would take place on top of Saudi Arabia's vast oil resources.

Third, Iran would very likely retaliate against an Israeli attack on a much larger scale than by merely increasing financial, logistical, and arms support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and other anti-Israeli non-state actors. Tehran could additionally retaliate in the following ways:

a) by attacking Israel directly with ballistic missiles: the Iranian Shahab-3 (type "Meteor") medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) has a range of 1,300 km and could therefore reach Israel. However, the reliability of the missile is questionable. The operational status of the Shahab-3 (type "Variant") MRBM with a range of up to 2,400 km is unclear;

b) by interrupting its oil exports in order to provoke a rise in the world oil price. The remaining oil producers would very likely be unable to compensate the loss of Iran's share. Hence, in conjunction with psychological dynamics influencing the oil market, the oil price would likely rise. However, Iran would not be able to uphold such a policy for an extended period since it depends on the revenues from oil exports;

c) by targeting oil installations on the Arabian side of the Gulf, attacking tanker ships in the Gulf waterways, and attempting to block the Strait of Hormuz.

By doing so, Iran would provoke skyrocketing oil prices. A partial breakdown of oil production in the Arab Gulf states and/or an impairment of water-bound export routes would have a devastating effect on the world economy and very likely drag other states, predominantly the United States, into a military conflict with Iran;

d) by attacking US military installations in the Gulf and thereby forcing the United States to retaliate.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Not only would an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear program not serve Israel's security interests, it would also have disastrous side effects. For the benefit of merely postponing the abstract threat posed by an Iranian nuclear weapons capability, Israel would break international law, risk a humiliating military defeat, provoke both asymmetrical and symmetrical attacks on its territory, help the Iranian regime stabilize its power, prompt a radicalization of Iranian foreign policy, and accept the risk of both an oil crisis of unprecedented magnitude and the outbreak of a regional war.

Hence, the EU and its member states should engage Israel in a critical dialogue about the potential repercussions of a pre-emptive strike against Iran and emphatically advocate a peaceful conflict resolution. The EU should use all diplomatic channels to clarify to Israel that any further conflict escalation would jeopardize both Israel's and the EU's vital interests in national and regional security, respectively, as well as economic stability.

With regard to Iran, constant threats of force and escalating economic sanctions have proven to be counterproductive as they further motivated Tehran to forward its nuclear program. In contrast incentive-based negotiations are more likely to be effective. The EU, having less strained relations with Iran than the United States as well as a positive track record in peaceful conflict resolution, should take the leading role in promoting a policy of détente in the relations between the West and Iran.

It is essential that the West understands and responds to the Iranian regime's motivation behind its nuclear program. Tehran predominantly aims for prestige and international recognition as a regional power, regime security through deterrence, and energy diversification. It is imperative that the United States and the Europeans recognize and confront Iran as an equal partner in international relations and refrain from branding the regime as illegitimate; the latter approach, widely considered as imperialistic meddling in Iranian affairs, harms rather than supports democratic reforms anyway. Moreover, any threats of regime change should be seized immediately. In this context, the EU should publicly emphasize Iran's natural right to sovereignty and territorial integrity and not condone or support any military action in violation of international law. In addition, the EU should actively advocate a multilateral non-aggression agreement between Iran, the United States, and the Arab Gulf states.

At the same time the EU should support an official US declaration whereby any Iranian pre-emptive attack on either Israel or the Arab Gulf monarchies would be considered a situation of collective self-defense.

Lastly, in return for increased transparency of its nuclear program the EU and its member states should offer Iran substantive trade agreements as well as support in its attempt to diversify its energy sector. In this context the EU should reconsider past proposals to provide Iran with nuclear fuel rods for energy production and offer technical support and cooperation in the field of renewable energy.

The Iranian regime has repeatedly shown its readiness to compromise. It is not too late to take Tehran up on its offer.

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